
Participation and Local Democracy in Croatia

IVAN GRDEŠIĆ

Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb
Associate Professor of Croatian Political System

Summary

Author presents the basic findings of the survey on political participation in Croatia. Data presented indicate that Croatian citizens still have rather satisfactory level of political interest and that they do follow the political information in the mass media, specifically on television. On the other hand, they express low levels of political efficacy and believe that there is very little that can be changed by political participation and activism. The formal forms of political participation, like voting, also show the declining rates. Levels of non-satisfaction with the quality of democratic life are high. Major problems in the country are perceived as economic and major strengths are seen in the natural resources and potential of the people.

Introduction

Changes of the type of political system, democratization and marketization, do not provide the automatic solution for the strong civil society of private owners and voters. These are preconditions so desperately needed in all postcommunist societies, but in particular in Croatia. Inherent in the ideological background of the new political force is also a collective notion, this time of nation-state, or better to say national-state. In addition, Croatian democratic change is marked by the development of massive political force (Croatian Democratic Union), a political party that functions as a national movement. Collective underpinnings of the new system provide structural limits to the fast development of a liberalized civil sector. The old debate on civil society state relations may very well start again. The need to reposition the role of the state present the new and even more difficult challenge. This time it is about the limits upon the powers of the state. Without the modern state there is no civil society. The transformation of the old communist state into the modern state of law, first of all, giving up on the control of economy and civil society. There must be difference between the political and economic power. Finally, nationalism may in the name of unity and national (now state) interests overrule private rights in the sphere of civil society.

Political participation, participation in democratic life, is the life-line of civil society. Civil society operates and lives by participation of its members. There are systemic and individual obstacles to the participation. I have tried to pinpoint some of them in this research report. Sustaining the democratic institutions will very much depend on

the capacity of civil society to provide inputs and demands on the political system and political participation, formal or informal, group or private.

Methodology

The Poll was conducted on the random sample of 1,000 respondents, eligible voters, in the following cities: Zagreb (336), Varaždin (60), Osijek (99), Rijeka (183), Zadar (62), Split (196) and Dubrovnik (60). The sample has a margin of error of $\pm 3.3\%$ for the urban population of Croatia. It was conducted before April 1997 local elections by a written questionnaire by trained students of the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb.

The survey was conducted on urban population and because of that the answers of the respondents are more critical than they would be in the general sample. Election results and polls show that urban voters support opposition parties more than the rest of the electorate.

There are four basic categories of data: background socioeconomic data of respondents, data on political (election) participation, community involvement and non-governmental organization participation. The measurement scales are widely used. The poll is not extensive; it includes only 44 questions, and takes about 30 minutes to be completed.¹

Interpretation of data

Media exposure and interest

In this report political participation will be used in more general terms and will include not only the formal participation as voting, but also the more informal participation not necessarily targeted towards state institutions. But we do share the opinion that political participation is a rational way to: (1) influence and control political life and social environment, (2) provide for better legitimacy and acceptance of collective decisions, (3) integrate the citizens in their community. Political participation is not only an instrument of influence and power but also a value in itself.

Participation requires resources – time, money, skills and information – that citizens may not have. Political life in general is the function of the communication process and in this respect the data on citizens' exposure to the media explains at the same time two things: (1) the levels of motivation to learn and potentially participate in community affairs (interest) and (2) the scale and form of the media's potential influence on the public.

Little less than half of our respondents read daily newspapers every day (46%) and 27% few times a week. Except for the reason of time, low income is the strong limita-

¹ The Research has been financially supported by USAID office in Croatia.

tion that people do not read the print media more. Additionally, the print media have much stronger presence of information on activities of the opposition parties and commentaries critical of the government and the ruling party than the electronic media.

Radio is a more popular source of information (and probably present in every household) than newspapers so that 60% of respondents listen to the radio for a few hours, and 22% less than an hour. This is a rather large time budget and allows for plenty of information to filter in and be heard. Local radio stations are by far more popular (59% respondents listen to the local radio) than the state radio (15%). This information gives additional significance to the importance of local radio stations, to the procedures of licencing, signal reach and importance of local radio stations competition.

Television is widely considered to be the most influential media in the country, specially in the field of political information. The major political broadcast is the main evening news (“Dnevnik”) and 59% of respondents watch it every day, and 25% a several times a week. This data proves the importance of the news broadcast and also the rather high motivation of the people to watch highly political information every day for 30 minutes.

Table 1. Television – evening news broadcast “Dnevnik”

Period	Percentage of respondents watching
June 6-13, 1991	60
July 22-29, 1991	69
June 5-12, 1992	59
March 20-27, 1993	56
June 19-25, 1993	39
September 26 – October 2, 1993	47
November 11-18, 1993	49
February 12-19, 1994	47
May 1994	38
July 1994	40
October 1994	41
January-July 1995	44
August-December 1995	44
September 21-27, 1996	41
October 26 – November 1, 1996	42

Source: Croatian television research department, survey research.

The ratings presented show the importance of the television during the war (1991-1992) when information had almost existential importance. On some of the peak days the ratings increased to more than 80 percent. Through the years there has been a steady decline of the number of people watching the main news, but it is still well over 40 percent.

Exposure to the media is only a precondition to learn and get the information relevant for political participation. To test the real knowledge, we have asked respondents for the names of local and national political leaders. On the national level, 83% of the respondents know that prime minister of Croatia's government is Zlatko Mateša. Results on the more local level are not so good because only little more than a half (55%) gave the correct answer who is the "župan" – county governor. Data on the sources of information about the political issues can be additionally illustrated by the following table:

Table 2. Sources of information about the elections and political parties

Sources of information, in %	1990	1992	1995
Daily press, weeklies, journals, etc.	87	75	73
Television, radio	96	95	92
Meetings of political organizations, parties	20	8	6
Party press and newsletters	21	10	7
Special publications and campaign meetings	16	8	15
Conversation with friends and relatives	74	70	66
I am not interested	12	9	6

Source: Election surveys conducted by the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb.

Not only do people listen to the radio and television more than they read newspaper; they also receive most of the politically relevant information from these media. There has been a decline in the importance of press as a source of political information while television has retained the high percentages. Institutional source of information, party meetings and similar places, are losing importance as a source of information. The negative trend is also noticeable in informal communication.

General interest to participate

One of the major indicators in the survey is the perception of interest to participate in public and political life. This perception is almost identical for the levels of interest nationally and locally. While this kind of evaluation is quite general, it is based on personal experience, and tells us a lot not only about the personal attitudes but also about the political culture. It has a feedback affect on the potential participation – "if others are not willing to participate why should I bother".

High levels of interest can be seen in about one quarter of citizens, one quarter is not interested and half of them are somewhat interested. The distribution of this data is rather normal and does not show any extreme values. There is a ground for a possible increase of citizens' interests in public issues.

People on average have interest in public issues, which is additionally supported by the data on the conversation about the problems of the community. Little less than half

of the respondents (44%) say they discuss the problems every day or several times per week. There is one third of the citizens who have no interest in political life and consider voting the maximum of their political activity.

Table 3. Evaluation of the general interest of citizens in Croatia to participate in the public and political life:

Degree of interest:	%
1. Not interested	7
2. Weak interest	22
3. Somewhat interested	46
4. Very interested	22
5. Very much interested	3

Political efficacy – perception of influence

Political efficacy is described as the perception of influence on political process that it is worthwhile to perform one's civic duties. People who have a sense of political efficacy, who perceive to have influence, are more likely to participate.

While data on general interest are optimistic, a large majority of respondents evaluate that they have very small influence or no influence at all. Here influence is perceived in a general way, not for specific issues.

Table 4. Perception of influence:

Level of influence	On local government (in %)	On state government (in %)
1. No influence	44	58
2. Little influence	33	25
3. Medium influence	14	10
4. Big influence	3	2
5. Very big influence	2	1
6. Not able to evaluate	4	4

If people perceive that they have very little or no influence at all (about 80%) it will be very difficult to motivate them to participate. We have also measured the level of efficacy by the perception of possible change by political participation in public affairs. This indicator is more direct in measuring the participation potentials.

The data are similar to the perception of influence, 76% think that nothing or very little can be changed by participation. The rather positive data on general interest do not (at this time) contradict to the negative perception of influence or possible change by participation. Interest presumes some level of information and understanding and this allows for an evaluation of perception of influence. People can be interested but think

that there is little that they can change by their involvement in public life. The problem is that in the long run this situation will also decrease the level of interest.

Table 5. Does political participation matter?

Can things be changed by the participation in public affairs?	%
1. Cannot change	26
2. Can change little	50
3. Can change quite a lot	15
4. Can change plenty	4
5. Can change everything	5

Low levels of political efficacy need additional explanation and clarification. On the systemic level Croatia, as other post-communist countries, is in the process of institutional stabilization. This process is characterized by heavy regulative activity and bureaucratic tendencies. This process of stabilization, coupled with bureaucratic trends and a strong centralization of state apparatus foreclosed the opportunities for individual or group influence limiting the perception of influence and political efficacy. The strong political ruling party locked individual political ambitions outside the realm of party politics. The political life in general has been captured by the political parties (including the opposition parties), almost stolen from the citizens due to the role the parties had in the transition through the electoral process. The politics in the country is confined to party relations and activities.

On the other hand, transition issues of state-building, introduction of a market, democratic developments, are not the standard issues for political participation. They all need high levels of commitment and activity of the whole population, since this is almost a plebiscitary way of politics. This pattern of political life is not the best environment for standard participatory behavior.

On more personal or group level some additional explanations are possible and are provided by respondents. Lack of resources, time, money, information, knowledge and skills explain 64% of low efficacy. About 19% of respondents think that this is not their responsibility but that of politicians, 14% that participation makes no difference and is not worth the effort. Interestingly, only 1% of respondents think that political participation is the communist legacy. On the operational level of the knowledge and skills we can see that 64% of respondents do not know where to go to get or give relevant information. This is a rather significant indicator because it opens the possibility for training and support that could increase the sense of political possibilities and political efficacy.

*Participation dynamics**Motivation*

Why and how do people participate? How much participation is there and who are the participants? These and other questions form the set of indicators about participation dynamics. People participate if they feel that they can make a difference, when community environment is supportive and when the institutional structures are favorable.

Motivation for participation is expressed in two major forms according to the survey data: one, it is a more efficient way to solve problems than waiting for the state to respond, and, second, participation is the way for mutual help and cooperation. Both of these motivations are very good grounds for the efforts to promote participation. They form a positive base for development (61% agree on these two motivators). Less acceptable motivation, in terms of community interest and development, is that participation is the way to make a political career (12% respondents).

Initiative

Perception of the participation in the community is rather negative. The respondents think that in a problem situation people will wait (18%) and complain (41%) about the problem. They perceive very limited initiative in the community. About one third think that people will call or go to demand the resolution of the problem situation from a state agency. Only 6% think that people will organize and try to solve the problem by themselves. This problem situation is very general and the reactions of the community can be very different in specific situations, but it does show low levels of initiative and motivation to organize and participate in solving local problems.

Promoters

Most of our respondents (52%) see as the promoters of the participation local politicians and leaders who are already active and are supposed to take action. The second group of possible activists are those who suffer most from the problem situation (27%). If the initiative is in the hands of the local political leadership then it would be necessary to motivate them to promote the local participation, providing them with the skills and justification for this democratic form of life.

Local leaders should try to build their political base bottom up, but that goes contrary to the influence of their political party. Local politicians depend at this moment on the central party offices.

First contacts

When citizens want to take action to resolve some of their problems, they usually contact local government (28% of the respondents think so) in the city (often they want to talk to the mayor directly). This demonstrates that people are not apprehensive about approaching local state office, and that they perceive a city to be the proper institution to respond to their demands. This should have consequences for the city public relations and information services, to provide these citizens with the appropriate information and advise them where to go to resolve their problem.

On the other hand, most people (39%) would first try to find a personal connection, someone they know, in the city or anywhere, who they think may have some influence.

This orientation to the private channels of problem resolution show, supported with other data in the report, that citizens consider the state as a slow and not very efficient instrument. Procedural channels can take plenty of their time, energy, knowledge, paperwork and patience.

The third choice of the first contact are the media (20%). People approach the media to help them solve their problem by publicizing it. This is somewhat an unexpected result but does show the perception of the media as an influential and powerful way to press the authorities. People like to threaten with the media the not so polite bureaucrat or other public servant. This may have potentially beneficial value in promoting independent media.

Very low percentages as a place of the first contact were given to the local political party office (3%), local representatives (5%), NGOs (3%). These more organized, “democratic”, forms of political life, via political parties or other organizations are not present. People prefer direct or informal ways of resolving their problems. They do not perceive them as places that they can trust or places that are efficient and powerful enough. There is no experience with these forms of political life. NGOs are more looked at as opposition, problem producers for the government and not as the constructive organizations for problem solving. They may have more influence and credibility in the humanitarian sector and on the very personal type of help that the NGO provides directly to the individuals.

On a more general level, that of political life, people do see the importance of political parties and citizen organizations. Political parties as the best form of politics (26% of the respondents) and other organizations (33%) dominate over personal type of politics. This data show how people do understand the importance of institutional politics on a more general level, but in resolving their problems prefer direct and informal approach.

Participation in elections

Elections are the only form of mass political participation which is formal, regular, legitimate, limited in time, voluntary, and represent a specific form of communication in the form of votes and vetoes. Because of this, elections are an important form of political participation at the national and local level, they provide the opportunity for people to participate in collective decision making that may have importance and make sense.

Table 6. General interest of people in elections, in %

Degree of interest	1990	1992	1995
Very much interested	46	30	23
Average interest	38	55	58
Not interested	3	6	7
Don't know	13	8	12

Source: Election surveys conducted by the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb.

Table 7. Personal interest in elections, in %

Degree of interest	1990	1992	1995
Very much interested	45	37	31
Average interest	44	54	56
Not interested	11	9	14

Source: Election surveys conducted by the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb.

The data show a decline of interest in elections since 1990. This is an expected result. The 1990 elections were in the full sense historic and it would be almost impossible to have the same degree of involvement and interest later on.

Table 8. Election turn out

Election year and type	Turn out in %
1990 – First democratic elections	84
1992 – First presidential elections	75
1992 – Elections for the House of Representatives	76
1993 – Elections for the House of Counties	64
1995 – Elections for the House of Representatives	69
1997 – Elections for the House of Counties	71
1997 – Second presidential elections	55

Note: Percentages changed additionally because of the expanding electoral body due to the inclusion of the Croatian citizens with the permanent place of residence outside the R. of Croatia. The total numbers changed from 3,420,212 in 1990 to 4,070,032.

Particular elections may have different causes for the specific turnout and participation and it is difficult to make any general conclusions. Overall, there is a decline in the number of citizens voting. This in particular was very evident in the 1997 presidential elections. The frequency of the elections, strong incumbent party and candidate, low polarization issues, limited campaign potential, all contribute to the decline of the turnout. We should recall our data on the potential for change, which is perceived small.

The degree of interest in taking part in party campaigns is a little bit lower than the perception of general political interest. The campaign activities have no tradition among the citizens. They require rather strong political opinions and commitments and plenty of free time. They are also a very visible activity, that can produce opponents and enemies, which does not fit with the prevailing political culture. Only 10-14% of the respondents are ready to take an active part in a campaign, to put out posters, carry badges and flags, talk to other people to vote for the specific party, etc. There is plenty of work to be done by political parties to change these attitudes and recruit more volunteers. People prefer to observe and vote (84%) and stay out of active participation.

Table 9. Interest of people to participate in the 1997 election campaign

Degree of interest	%
No interest	9
Little interest	31
Average interest	31
Big interest	18
Very big interest	4
Cannot say	7

This position is compatible with the data on party membership. This data is very difficult to verify, but even if there are more people in different political parties, their refusal to admit that is also evidence in support of the non-participation orientation of the respondents.

Table 10. Political party membership, in %

Election year	1990	1992	1995	1997
NOT a member of the political party	71	86	90	95

Source: Election surveys conducted by the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb.

Party preference expressed in more general terms, “are you close to any political party”, is larger and 40% of the respondents answered yes to this question. This once again demonstrates the political interest but not the translation of it into the activity. This could be a ground for the constructive effort of the parties to mobilize volunteers.

Policy issues and political participation

Besides the general perception of interest, influence and participation, it is interesting to analyze evaluations of more specific policy fields.

Table 11. Positive developments in the specific policy fields

Policy field	Degree of positive development, in %				
	No	Little	Average	Big	Very big
Independence of the media	24	24	33	14	5
Reintegration of the territory	12	18	35	27	8
Privatization	32	22	24	13	9
Local democracy	23	24	37	12	4
Rights of women	23	21	35	14	7
Human rights	21	21	33	17	8

The data on the perception of positive developments in the last few years are almost identical for all of the issues except for the reintegration of the Croatian territory. On this issue, the grades are much higher and do reflect the reality of the positive process, both in terms of the Croatian military effort and in respect to the recent political developments in the east of the country. For all other fields almost half of the respondents are not satisfied with the developments. Because of the complexity of the problems, progress may be slow and very difficult to measure on the short time basis.

Table 12. Citizens' influence in specific policy fields

Policy field	Degree of influence, in %				
	No	Little	Average	Big	Very big
Independence of the media	25	24	32	14	5
Reintegration of the territory	21	28	29	14	8
Privatization	34	26	24	11	5
Local democracy	19	23	38	14	6
Rights of women	19	23	35	16	7
Human rights	18	22	33	18	9

When asked about the specific field of possible influence, the respondents usually give more positive answers. This general finding is also applicable in our research. While citizens have realistic perception of their own influence, they do make a distinction among the policy fields. In the policies which are dominated by state regulative action and state agencies (privatization, media and reintegration) and are a part of the more "state business" the respondents show lower influence. A little bigger influence is in the "softer" fields in which people can make a difference through social action and possible changes of behavior or culture. These specific fields (human rights in general and local democracy) can be influenced by participation and they need continuous support to achieve a desired level of positive change. On the contrary, where the state monopoly is strong, little action by the citizens is deemed possible.

Social problems today and tomorrow

Two thirds of the respondents, when asked about the most important problems in Croatia today, list one of the problems from the area of economy: unemployment (24%), the situation in economy (11%), individual economic position (10%) standard of living (13%) and the consequences of the war (10%). General political issues of democratic development, human rights, political system are far behind. This is a very strong message about how the citizens view national agenda. This is also supported by the answers to the question what the problems in Croatia in the next five years will be. People basically give the same answers. This information can be of importance for the trade unions, NGOs and political parties in planning their future activities. The issues of the standard of living, especially unemployment, and economic future should be

“transported” to the political arena and find their place in the future election campaigns. There are about 25% of those who do not know or did not answer the questions.

Croatian strengths and advantages

Judging from the answers of our respondents, Croatian strengths and potentials are in two major groups: the first group is national wealth, composed of the natural resources (10%), the potential and the quality of the people (16%).

The second group is national strength which is made of social and political values of the nation (22%) (patriotism, unity, will, hope, religion, European tradition and Western orientation) and powers of the state (15%) (freedom, peace, independence, integrity, democracy, law, army).

Choices made by the respondents are structured and show very sophisticated thinking about the present and the future of the country. These are basic values on which national consensus should be built. Some of these values, of course, are not accomplished but there is a strong perception that this is what makes Croatia survive as the state and the citizens as the nation.

What kind of democracy and life?

In order to summarize the evaluations and perceptions of our respondents, mostly urban Croatian population, we have asked them to grade the level of satisfaction with democracy in Croatia. Democracy is a vague notion but we believe that people have learned what kind of basic values democracy is made of.

Table 13. Satisfaction with democracy in Croatia:

Degree of satisfaction	%
Not at all	18
Little	28
Average	32
Plenty	13
Very much	4
Cannot say	5

The respondents are quite critical of the democratic situation in the country. This is in accordance with the other data we have presented from this survey. At this point it is necessary to mention that the sample in this survey has urban bias and in that sense reflects urban population's more critical opinion of the ruling political party. More rural sample would probably have more positive evaluation.

What kind of life?

Political life and political participation are a reflection of overall conditions in which people live and work. We have just seen what people think about the democratic environment. But how they evaluate other, more private elements of their life, elements that can in the future make a basis for a greater democratic participation.

Table 14. Satisfaction in general

Satisfaction with	Degree of satisfaction, in %		
	Very much	Average	Not satisfied
With life in general	20	64	16
With living conditions (housing, etc.)	33	46	21
With financial condition	8	42	50
With social successes	19	58	23

It is a good indicator that people are in general satisfied with their life. This is a basic condition for any kind of activity or change. The problems, as seen before, are concentrated in the economic area. The standard of living is the major problem Croats face today. And it is not the housing but the basic income.

Conclusions

Democratic life and political participation as its functional dimension are the result of different social conditions and processes. The data in our research show a few striking features of the Croatian democratic process in light of political participation.

There is substantive interest in politics and public life. People are well informed but they receive their information in most cases from the electronic mass media, state television and local radio stations. The positive level of interest is not translated into their political efficacy. A strong majority of the people think that they have no influence on the local or national government.

Elections are the major form of collective political participation. In Croatia they had additional importance as the instrument of democratic change. In general electoral participation the turnout is getting smaller. Citizens prefer to observe and vote and are not willing to take part in party campaign activities.

Croatian citizens see their problems in the economic area, income, standard of living, unemployment, etc. Political issues are not their priorities. They see the strength of the country in the people and natural resources, combined with the national values and the independent state.

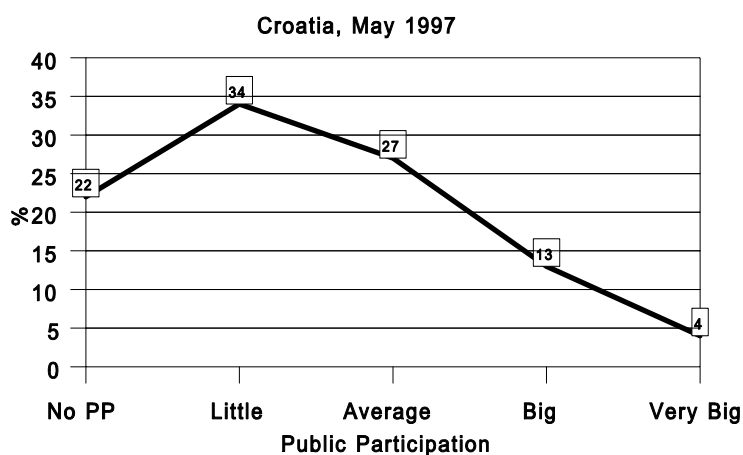
The areas of possible intervention by strengthening participation and community efforts are human rights and local democracy in general. In these areas there are basic positive conditions for improvement and change in the desired direction. One of the

major obstacles to participation is seen by the people in the lack of resources, skills, information, time, and money. Investment in democratic capacity and potential will influence those areas in which citizens today see a limited space for influence (the areas under the strong state regulation). Participation is not only the instrument of democratic change but also has value in itself, and this can have many other positive and unexpected consequences.

As an additional form of conclusion I have created the “public participation index” from four data sets: general interest, perception of influence, perception of possible change by political participation and motivation to participate in election campaigns. Used in the future surveys it can show the basic trends in the Croatian democratic life.

Translated by the author

Public Participation Index



References

- Almond, Gabriel – Verba, Sidney, *The Civic Culture*, Sage Publ., London, 1989
- Baldersheim, Harald, ed. *Local Democracy and the Processes of Transformation in East-Central Europe*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1996
- Bunce, Valerie – Csanadi, Maria, Uncertainty in the Transition: Post-Communism in Hungary, *East European Politics and Societies*, No. 2, Spring 1993, pp. 240-75
- DeSario, Jack – Langton, Stuart, *Citizens Participation in Public Decision Making*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1987
- Grdešić, Ivan – Kasapović, Mirjana – Šiber, Ivan – Zakošek, Nenad, *Hrvatska u izborima '90*, Zagreb, Naprijed, 1991
- Hermet, Guy, Introduction: The Age of Democracy, *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 128, May, 1991, pp. 249-58
- Offe, Claus, Capitalism by Democratic Design? Democratic Theory Facing the Triple Transition in East Central Europe, *Social Research*, Vol. 58, No. 4. 1991, pp. 864-92
- Pokrovac, Zoran, ed., *Građansko društvo i država*, Zagreb, Naprijed, 1991
- Prpić, Ivan, Kriza legitimnosti komunističkih poredaka, *Politička misao*, No. 3, 1991
- Rau, Zbigniew, ed., *The Reemergence of Civil Society in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1991
- Rupnik, Jacques, *The Other Europe*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1989
- Shin, Doh Chull, On the Third Wave of Democratization, *World Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 1994, pp. 135-70
- Šiber, Ivan, ed., *The 1990 and 1992/93 Sabor Elections in Croatia*, WZB, Sigma, Berlin, 1997
- Verba, Sidney – Nie, Norman, *Participation in America*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1972